

America and the World - 2017 and Beyond "Aristocracy, Oligarchy, and Donald Trump"

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"When a commonwealth, after warding off many great dangers, has arrived at a high pitch of prosperity and power, it is evident that, from long continuance of great wealth, the manner of life of its citizens will become more extravagant; further, rivalry for office and in other spheres of activity will become more and more fierce. And as these conditions continue, the desire for office and the shame of loss, as well as the ostentation and extravagance of living, will prove the beginning of deterioration of the state. For this change the people will be credited, when they become convinced that they are being cheated by the elite out of avarice, and are puffed up with flattery by others of the elite who act out of love of office."

—Polybius of Megalopolis, writing about the threat facing the Roman Republic, ca. 150 B.C.

In influential recent essays, both Andrew Sullivan in *New York Magazine* and Paul Krugman in the *New York Times* have reacted to the rise of Donald Trump by alerting us to warnings coming from thinkers long ago concerning the fragility of democratic politics.¹ This essay undertakes an evaluation of those ancient warnings and their relevance for the American republic in the age of President Trump. It seems to me that Sullivan and Krugman are on to something.

Ancient writers had plenty to say about how democracies and free republics fell apart into chaos or despotism. Intellectuals in the ancient Mediterranean world engaged in serious political analysis concerning the various

¹ Andrew Sullivan, "America has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny," *New York Magazine*, 1 May 2016; also called "Democracies End When They Are Too Democratic" *New York Magazine*, 1 May 2016, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/04/america-tyranny-donald-trump.html>; Andrew Sullivan, "The Republic Repeals Itself", *New York Magazine*, 9 November 2016; Paul Krugman, "How Republics End," *New York Times*, 19 December 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/opinion/how-republics-end.html?_r=0

types and categories of states in existence and the transitions that sometimes occurred from one form of state to another. “Monarchy,” “tyranny” and “despotism” are all Greek terms of political analysis; “aristocracy” and “oligarchy” are as well; so is “democracy” itself; for that matter, so are the terms “political” and “analysis.” “Republic” is a non-Greek word, but it comes from the Romans: *res publica*.

These ancient thinkers had a sense of the enormous accomplishment involved in the creation of polities under the rule of law, where the rights of citizens were clearly set forth and protected, and where government came into being—and was legitimized—through frequent popular elections. They had an equally vivid sense of how fragile such democratic political structures were, and how threatened they were from multiple directions. The success of Donald Trump’s demagogic political campaigning led to Andrew Sullivan’s recent shocked perception that the American democratic system, too, while it has been very long-lasting, is not necessarily immortal; this would not have been a perception foreign to the ancients. As aristocrats, or at least very well off men (and they were all men), they worried about the irrationality of the poverty-stricken and uneducated masses; and so when Sullivan cited Plato on this, he was accused (both in *Salon* and *The New Republic*) of engaging in undemocratic elitism.² But ancient thinkers worried even more about corruption and factionalism within the social elite, and the ambitions of oligarchs to seize total power with the help of the mob.

Polybius himself distinguished carefully between aristocracy and oligarchy. For him, aristocracy was rule by an elite, but it was a public-spirited elite; oligarchy was its evil twin, the corrupt form of this government, with an elite only interested in its own wealth and power. “It was men of noble bearing who abolished monarchy and established aristocracies based on the will of the people. The commons were grateful to the aristocrats for destroying tyranny, while the leaders assumed responsibility for the state and regarded nothing as more important than the common interest, administering the public affairs of the people with paternal solicitude. But when new generations inherited their ancestors’ position of authority, having no experience of misfortune and none of civic equality and liberty of speech, and having been brought up from the cradle amid the power and high position of their fathers, they abandoned themselves some to greed and unscrupulous money-making, others to indulgence in wine and convivial excess, others again to the violation of women and the rape of boys; they thus converted the aristocracy into an oligarchy, and aroused the anger of the people against them, as it had been aroused against the tyrants. For whenever anyone who has noticed the jealousy and hatred in which the elite are regarded by the mass of the citizens has the courage to speak or act against the chiefs of the state, he has the whole mass of the people ready to back him.”³

Donald Trump appears to fit the mold of the oligarchical agitator described by Polybius. On the one hand, Trump is famous for the extravagance with which he himself lives: the private plane with the egotistic “Trump” emblazoned on it, the gold elevator in Trump Tower, the gold-plated bathroom fixtures. Both Plato, writing ca. 390 B.C., and Polybius, writing 150 years later, stressed a linkage between such extravagant lifestyle among the elite and political danger: for the extravagant lifestyle of the elite was an expression of

² Alex Trimble Young, “Andrew Sullivan is Wrong Again: His Mainstream Liberalism has Become Scarily Anti-democratic,” *Salon*, 8 May 2016; http://www.salon.com/2016/05/08/andrew_sullivan_is_wrong_again_his_mainstream_liberalism_has_become_scarily_anti_democratic/; Astra Taylor, “The Anti-Democratic Urge,” *The New Republic*, 18 August 2016; <https://newrepublic.com/article/135757/anti-democratic-urge>.

³ Polybius, *Histories*, Book 3, chapters 8-9 (condensed).

uncontrolled appetite. To Plato, the transformation of social leaders from a community-oriented aristocracy to a self-seeking oligarchy expressed itself through the growth of ugly appetites among the elite. Originally this was for feasting, sex, and the display of wealth, but for certain members of the elite the loss of control over appetites eventually took the form of ambition for power without limits. And Plato warned that for some members of this oligarchical culture of egoism, the way to such power was for them to turn to the people for support against their fellow oligarchs.

Among Roman writers, the historian Sallust (ca. 40 B.C.) also linked the influx of wealth to moral degeneration, uncontrolled appetites and intensifying conflict among the elite. In the early Roman republic “once liberty had been won, good morals were cultivated; there was the greatest harmony and little or no avarice; justice and probity prevailed...citizen vied with citizen only for the prize of merit. Each man strove to be the first to strike down the foe, to scale the wall—this they considered riches, fame, and high nobility.” But now, in Sallust’s own time, “when our country had grown great through toil...the lust for money, and then for power, grew; avarice destroyed all noble values, and taught in their place insolence, cruelty, neglect of the gods...As soon as riches came to be held in honor, and dominion and power followed in their train, virtue began to lose its luster, poverty to be considered a disgrace, and they disregarded modesty, chastity, everything human and divine... You look upon houses and villas reared to be the size of cities...” In such a city, it was easy for a renegade member of the elite such as Catiline to gather around him men (and a few women) to stage a coup d’état based on appealing to the discontented populace to rise up against the corrupt oligarchy.⁴

In the face of these warnings from the far past, consider that on the one hand Donald Trump is himself fabulously rich and one of the elite, while on the other hand his victory in 2016 was a victory first over the Republican Party oligarchy and establishment—most obviously in the person of Jeb Bush, the son and the brother of previous presidents—and then victory over the Democratic Party oligarchy and establishment as well, in the person of Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. Trump accomplished this in good part through an appeal to a working class that has felt itself abandoned by the elites of both parties since at least the passage NAFTA in the mid-1990s. Once more, Trump appears to fit a pattern of upper-class demagogues familiar to ancient political thinkers.

These writers adduced an additional danger to free polities and their free citizenry: the growth of government power, most often necessitated by the administration of empires by republics. Aristotle warned ca. 350 B.C. that men who became accustomed to the wielding of power as governors over subordinate regions made dangerous citizens when they returned home to free polities; they were used to imposing their will on the weak and found it hard to accept republican limits on their political behavior. In the case of Rome, this warning of Aristotle also proved correct.

In Rome there was at first a city council (the Senate) and annually elected officials with limited powers and limited time in office, one-year term-limits (especially the two consuls). Yet these city institutions ended up administering an empire that stretched from Spain to Syria. Large-scale problems on the imperial periphery then came to require greater concentrations of governmental power: governors over large regions for multiple years. And so the Romans experimented with special “great commands”: Marius, consul for five straight years against the German threat, 104-100 B.C.; Sulla in the East, 88-83 B.C.; Pompey in the East, 67-62 B.C.; Julius Caesar against the Celts in Gaul, 58-50 B.C. While great commands led to increased efficiency in the

⁴ Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*, chapters 9-12, and 14.

handling of large imperial problems, the danger lay in whether the holder of a great command would surrender what was already the power of an emperor and return to a life of limited republican behavior in Rome. As the senior senator Q. Lutatius Catulus protested concerning Pompey's command: "If it is necessary to put such power in the hands of a single man, Pompey is that man; but no man should have such power."⁵ Julius Caesar, in the end, refused to give up the power he thought of as his, preferring civil war instead. And so the experiment that worked to solve large imperial problems wrecked the republic.

It can be argued that American Republic has followed a similar pattern: since the 1930's and 1940s, Presidential power has continually expanded, especially in foreign affairs, no matter which person or which party was in the White House. Faced in World War II with terrible threats on a global scale, and afterwards with an enemy in the Soviet Union which was perceived as at least equal in global power to the United States, more and more control has been ceded to the President in the name of self-defense from external enemies. The Constitution gives the right to declare war only to the Congress, but the last time that happened was in 1941; Presidents have gained the power to fight the wars on their own. Meanwhile, since the Islamist terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001, the government's ability to engage in warrantless surveillance of its own citizenry has hugely increased. This was true under President George W. Bush, and President Barack Obama did little to stop it. Indeed, with a Congress opposed to many of his policies (e.g., on immigration), President Obama got into the habit of ignoring Congress altogether and issuing presidential directives whenever he could. And now, with all this increased Presidential power, we are going to have President Trump, the ruthless renegade oligarch.

Two additional aspects of the present Presidential campaign would have disturbed ancient thinkers. Thucydides, writing ca. 410 B.C., described how the city-state of Corcyra fell apart. The downward spiral began when one faction, defeated by an assembly-vote on a crucial policy (towards Athens), decided to bring their victorious enemies to court by fabricating criminal accusations against them. This criminalizing of political differences, Thucydides said, violated the limits on internal rivalry necessary in a free state (Corcyra was a democracy)—norms that meant that political defeat did not carry personal penalties beyond the defeat itself. In the case of Corcyra, the criminalizing of political differences eventually led to show trials, deepened internal divisions, assassinations, and then outright civil war. Thucydides commented that what happened at Corcyra could happen in any polity when one side or the other was absolutely desperate to win victory. Lack of limits on political conduct, Thucydides warned, led to chaos.⁶ Thus, a main reason that Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 B.C. was his fear of being put on trial for his actions as consul a full decade previously.⁷

We have now finished a political campaign where Donald Trump, in a face-to-face confrontation with Hillary Clinton on national television, overtly threatened to put her in prison if he won the election. It was an unprecedented act, a personal threat by the candidate of one of the United States' major political parties

⁵ Cicero, Speech to the Roman People in Favor of the Manilian Law (66 B.C.)

⁶ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 3, chapters 69-84.

⁷ Caesar, looking out at the thousands of Roman dead on each side after the civil war battle of Pharsalus a year later, said "This is what they [my enemies] wanted. I, Gaius Caesar, would have been condemned in the law courts if I had not looked to my army for protection" (Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* 30.4, based on the eye-witness account of the Caesarian general C. Asinius Pollio, who heard Caesar say it).

against the candidate of the other. Unprecedented in the American Republic, that is—but not at all unknown to ancient political thinkers, who warned of the consequences of such behavior for the internal stability of a free state.

Finally, factional conflict within ancient Greek states was sometimes so deep and bitter that one side preferred to call in the help of foreigners rather than accept the other faction's political victory. This phenomenon was remarked upon by political thinkers as early as Herodotus and Thucydides in the fifth century B.C. (it happened in the Corcyra case). In the Greek world of the third and second centuries B.C. this behavior was so common that the historian Polybius devoted an entire essay to it. It was not treason if a Greek government decided that community advantage lay in backing the powerful Romans against rival Greek states—because the safety of the state was on everyone's mind. Nor was it treason if a Greek government did the opposite and sided with the Macedonian kingdom when in war with Rome (though that was dangerous). Rather, treason was something quite specific: "the name of traitor attaches to those men who, at a time of public danger, for reasons either of personal safety or profit, or because of the sharpness of differences with the opposing party, put their city into the hands of the enemy, seeking foreign assistance to further their personal aims. All who commit actions of this kind may fairly be regarded as traitors."

And now in Donald Trump we see a candidate for President who not only benefitted from Russian-inspired leaking of discreditable information about his opponent, but actively encouraged this foreign interference in the Presidential campaign. When it became clear that the Russians were hacking into Democratic Party operations, Trump encouraged this unprecedented foreign interference, declaring that he hoped the Russians would find and release all of his opponent's allegedly hidden emails.⁸

It is clear that Thucydides and Plato, Polybius and Sallust would have been appalled at Donald Trump. But what I have sought to show here is that they would not have been surprised. The Trump phenomenon was familiar to them. They had a vivid awareness of the fragility of free states when the traditional limits on political behavior were broken by a ruthless demagogue.

What is to be done? A Roman historian of a later period, Cornelius Tacitus, provides an answer: while maintaining faith in the great national project, do not be eager to obey the man with power. Tacitus castigated those in the Roman elite who went along with emperors in order to win political success: "they were elevated to the heights of political office in precise proportion to their readiness to be slaves."⁹ Tacitus himself had a successful political career (consul in 97 A.D.)—and carried a sense of political guilt because of it; but we know that there were certain circumstances when he did not hesitate to disagree with the emperor. Now that Trump is President, we must all have the courage to do the same.

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⁸ "Donald Trump Calls on Russia to find Hillary Clinton's Missing Emails," *New York Times*, 27 July 2016; <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/us/politics/donald-trump-russia-clinton-emails.html>.

⁹ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Book 1, chapter 2.

Polybius (University of California Press, 1995). His most recent book is *Bad Moon Rising: How the Weather Underground Beat the FBI and Lost the Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2016).

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